

Promising Practice: Employer Engagement Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit Work Attributes Toward Careers in Health (WATCH) Project

The Work Attributes Toward Careers in Health (WATCH) Project is the Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit's Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG) program, funded by the Administration for Children and Families' Office of Family Assistance. The WATCH Project uses a variety of approaches to build relationships with employers, connect employers to project participants, and seek employer input and feedback. These connections establish long-term communication and encourage employers to turn to the project when they need to fill a position.

In establishing this relationship, WATCH career coordinators (case managers) meet with local employers to introduce the WATCH Project and share how it prepares participants for employment in the nursing and emergency medical services (EMS) fields. In addition, WATCH career coordinators are able to learn about the unique needs and expectations of each employer. They can also determine if an employer has nursing positions that need to be filled and then offer to share these job opening announcements with their participants.

Because of this relationship, WATCH career coordinators are often listed as references on participant résumés. This gives the career coordinators an opportunity to share information about applicants and also to connect with human resources (HR) and nursing personnel of regional employers. It establishes ongoing communication with employers as some HR personnel then contact WATCH for referrals when new positions need to be filled. Also, employers attend WATCH career coordinator staff meetings to share information about their hiring needs and requirements. Attending these meetings helps the employers to have a better sense of program functions and benefits and to offer input on suggested program changes.

The WATCH Project offers many opportunities for employers and students to meet and converse prior to hiring. This is a huge benefit to both, as students become aware of employers' expectations and employers get a feel for the students' abilities up front. Here are examples of these opportunities:

- Participants attend peer group meetings; employers are invited to the meetings to share information about their institutions and characteristics they look for in an employee.
- The WATCH Project holds employer events:
 - WATCH sponsored an event for local employers to meet and learn more about WATCH and its participants and to discuss common staffing issues.
 - WATCH hosted an employer event that allowed HR representatives to present information about their organizations and provide information to almost 50 WATCH participants about the role of nurses in their institutions, current hiring needs, the process for applying for positions with their institutions, and the availability of orientation, training and mentoring upon employment. HR representatives from six employers, representing a variety of healthcare settings (long-term care, hospitals, home healthcare, etc.), participated in a panel presentation and question-and-answer

session. A hospital recruiter delivered a presentation about job searching, resume writing, and interviewing. During a final networking session, HR representatives met with WATCH participants to answer their questions. This event is described in the online article at

<http://www.csiu.org/index.cfm?pageid=572&programid=271&programpageid=444>.

Both these events provided HR representatives from regional employers an excellent opportunity to network with one another and provide WATCH staff with valuable information about employer expectations and needs. In addition, the relationships established enable WATCH career coordinators and employers to discuss participants who have applied for work or who have been hired. Career coordinators use employer feedback to mentor participants who are working in the healthcare industry for the first time.

WATCH works with a local evaluator who surveys every employer that hires a WATCH participant. The survey asks the employer HR representative or direct supervisor to rate the WATCH employee, shortly after employment and again six months later, on 24 employment performance-related elements, using a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being “outstanding.” Currently WATCH has a 72% return rate on its employer surveys. WATCH does not receive the ratings of individuals, but it does get an analysis of the ratings for all employees, along with any employer comments (excluding the employer and employee names). The survey report provides constructive feedback on the success of participants who have moved to employment and helps to identify areas in which additional career training and counseling would be helpful. For example, according to the report for project year two, although the majority of the participants received a rating of “outstanding” or “very good” on attendance and punctuality, this was one of the elements that received the most ratings of “needs improvement.”

As the curriculum for the Advanced and Geriatric Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) apprenticeship programs was being developed, staff from two local long-term care facilities reviewed it and provided feedback. One especially helpful employer representative was an HR staff member with nursing experience from a local long-term care employer who provided input and recommendations based on her former experience as a CNA. Her input was very valuable, especially in the area of state-specific mandates and procedures related to CNA duties.